

As I laid there, flat on my back, in a dark warehouse in an industrial park, pinned to the ground by a shrieking, contorted man-mutant-thing, I really began to regret my decisions up to that point. I think it was the thing's breath, which had a delightful bouquet of rotting fish, that triggered it.

Why had I let Amir get into my head again? If I had just ignored him, I would have gone to the Halloween dance like a normal person rather than go investigating shady parts of town.

"Halloween is haram, Kamala!" he had told me. "Dressing up and parading around in costumes? It's a pagan ritual that distracts us from Allah!"

Ugh! He wouldn't shut up about it! I wanted to scream in his face like that stupid mutant was screaming in mine. Then I remembered, *oh yeah, I should probably do something about this thing.*

I puffed out my torso outward with sudden force like an airbag. The mutant flew off and landed in a nearby junk pile. I leapt up to my feet and quickly looked around for the large pulley hook I'd seen a few moments ago.

Thunder boomed outside, shaking the warehouse walls. The storm had really picked up. Lightning flashed and provided some much welcome light through the large windows and skylight above.

*Bingo.* I spotted the pulley slightly to my right. It hung about thirty feet away and another twenty feet in the air. I also caught a glimpse of two more mutant-things directly ahead, rushing full bent at me. I extended my legs quickly upward and pushed off the ground, which launched me over the lunging monsters. They went crashing into another junk pile. (There was a lot of junk in this place.) I retracted my legs and landed back on the ground in a three point stance.

*I am Iron Man,* I thought with a smile on my face, and then Amir popped into my head again.

"False idols, Kamala," he nagged. These memories were really cramping my style.

My last leap had gotten me closer to the pulley. I had to get up there. I was too exposed on the ground, and I didn't know how many of those ugly things were around.

The creatures had been popping up across Jersey City and Staten Island for weeks. The police were scouring every nook and cranny on this side of the Hudson looking for where they were coming from. Then finally, two nights ago, after a woman was mauled by one outside the Circle Q, Bruno fessed up to me. His brother Vic had told him where they were coming from and who was behind it. To be honest, I wasn't really surprised. This particular culprit had been behind a lot as of late.

*"Squaaaak! There's little Miss Fantastic!"*

*Right on cue,* I thought. Another roll of thunder sounded and lightning flared, as he descended slowly down through the air from the catwalks above.

The Inventor. He was using a set of thruster boots and hand stabilizers, wired to and powered by something in the backpack he wore, like some kind of jerry-rigged Iron Man get-up. He had obviously been raiding the Stark Industries warehouse down the street. I called out to him.

"What's wrong, birdy? Someone clip your wings?" He ceased his descent and hovered about twenty feet overhead. In addition to the secondhand flying contraption, he wore his

signature gray three-piece suit, which looked ridiculous. *Then again*, I thought, *anything he wore would look ridiculous. He has the body of a man and the head of a cockatoo!*

"*Raawk!* Always so quick to jest!" he replied. "We'll see who laughs last!" And with that, he let out a horrible shriek. I compulsively covered my ears. It was so shrill I started seeing little lightning bolts and sound waves emanating from his beak. My ears felt like they were going to burst into flame. I definitely preferred Amir's nagging to this.

*What's he doing?* I thought through the pain. *He isn't screaming. He must be...* My gut sank as figurative light bulbs lit up around my head.

*He must be calling something...*

Just then, a choir of muffled answering cries erupted from below. The ground before me, directly beneath the pulley, shook. I squinted through the dark to see what was going on. It wasn't solid ground; there were a pair of trap doors in the floor. Something (or worse yet, bunch of somethings) was trying to break through. The doors shook again, bending from the force. They shook again. And again.

*Yep, time to go*, I thought as dashed forward. I had only made it a couple of steps when another round of thunder erupted from outside and the trap doors burst open before me. Despite the fear center of my brain telling me to turn around, I pushed forward. I had to get to high ground.

Lightning flashed as several clawed hands appeared over the ledge. I extended my legs to twice their normal length for the last two steps and jumped into the air above the open trap door. I heard snarling below but didn't look down. I extended my left arm out and out until I finally caught the hook in my hand. As soon as I had a firm grip, I started to retract my legs, but it wasn't fast enough. Something grabbed me.

I screamed. I was too surprised to hold it back. I felt my grip slip, but thankfully I didn't let go of the hook completely. I looked down to see the clawed hand around my right ankle.

It was one of the creatures. It glared at me blankly with black eyes and hissed through its kind-of beak, kind-of not beak month thing. It reached up with its other hand and clawed at my leg. I grimaced in pain. In response, I landed a kick on its ugly face. The blow knocked the creature free of its hold, hurtling it downward to the concrete floor. With that thing out of the way, I finally had a moment to take in the rest of the horrible scene.

The storm outside was raging in full force now. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed every few seconds to allow sight of the warehouse floor below. Dozens of creatures had already emerged from the trap door and more were coming. They were human-like in shape, only more hunched over and contorted. Their bodies were covered in random patches of white feathers and their exposed skin was gray and wrinkly. They looked up at me hungrily, shrieking and snarling and biting and hissing. I thought I saw fire burning in their mouths and eyes.

In that moment, I really missed my brother.

"Hideous, aren't they?" the Inventor cried through the din of the storm and the creatures. He was hovering about thirty feet away, well out of my extended reach.

"What are they?" I called back as I hoisted myself up the pulley cable, putting distance between me and the monsters.

"Failed experiments," he replied. "I've been dabbling a little in cloning as of late."

*Cloning? Of course*, I thought. *The feathers. The talons.* It all started to make sense.

"You're trying to make more things like you," I said. And although I was confident I knew the answer, I followed up with, "Why?"

"You're a little punk!" he snarled back. "*Raawk!* You wouldn't understand!"

"Sure, I would," I said. "Being the only one of your kind. Surrounded by people who don't look like you or think like you. I get it. It gets lone--"

"Shut up, you!" the Inventor cried as he fired a pulse blast from one of his hand stabilizers. I didn't have the time to react, but I also didn't need it. The Inventor's aim was too far to the right. The blast sent him spinning through the air. He obviously needed more practice.

I seized the opportunity to scale the pulley cable and pull myself up on top of the crane arm that held it. Another pulse beam whizzed by to the left. This one was a lot closer.

The creatures below seemed to notice. They shrieked with excitement. At that moment, I looked down at them as a series of lightning flashes - the brightest I'd seen yet - lit up their faces. Some of them were looking at me with their hungry eyes, but others were looking at the Inventor the same way. That's when it dawned on me.

*He doesn't have control over them.* Another pulse beam flew over my head. The Inventor squawked in anger. He didn't have much control over those stabilizers either. Now was my chance to strike.

I started to Hulk out, increasing the muscle mass across my body, but especially in my arms and legs. I had grown to about five times my normal size before I felt the crane start to give.

*Hopefully this will be enough,* I thought as I reached down and grasped the pulley cable. I started to lift it when a pulse beam caught me across the left shoulder.

I cried out in pain, and the cable slipped out of my grasp. I heard the hungry cries of the creatures below and the cackling laughter of the Inventor. Frustration and fear flooded me as I swayed on my hazardous perch. I fought to restore my balance, but the increased weight of my body was betraying me. I started to panic, but then I heard Amir in my head.

"And be thou steadfast," he recited, "for surely, Allah suffers not the reward of the righteous to perish."

I felt warmth in my heart then. Fear fled me. I extended my left arm down and grasped the crane arm for balance. With my right, I reached down, grabbed the cable, and pulled it up. I brought myself up to my full height and began swinging the cable overhead, round and round.

This Hulk was ready to smash.

The Inventor saw this as he was lining up his next shot. He squawked in fear and fired before he was ready. As he did, I released the cable. His shot was wide off. Mine was right on.

The heavy hook at the end of the crane made contact with one of the Inventor's boots, which exploded in sparks. In pain and panic, he fired several stray shots from his stabilizers. One of these smashed through the large skylight window above, raining shards of glass on the creatures below. Many cried in pain and clutched their eyes. Others fled back down the door in the floor.

I watched the chaos as I dangled from the crane arm, which had shifted violently when I threw the cable. I was back to nearly normal size, except for some extra muscle mass in my arms, which I used to pull myself back up.

Standing safely on the crane arm, rain pouring down from the broken skylight, I spotted the Inventor, who had crashed atop a stack of three freight containers. He was trying to remove his stabilizers, which were sparking and smoldering. A few of the remaining creatures hissed and clawed at him from below, as they tried unsuccessfully to scale the sheer container walls. He wasn't going anywhere.

I chuckled at the sight. I had completely forgotten about the Halloween dance. At that moment, I was where I was supposed to be. And just then a thought crossed my mind.

*How ridiculous is my life?*

Suddenly, a massive boom of thunder erupted from directly above the warehouse. I covered my ears at the sound and looked up just as a bolt of lightning passed through the open skylight and struck down on the warehouse floor. The light from the impact was intense, forcing me to shield my eyes. I heard an explosion and creatures shriek in pain.

When I removed my arms from over my eyes, I looked down to the warehouse floor where the lightning had struck. My jaw dropped.

It was Thor. And he was looking right at me.

"Miss!" he called. "Miss, can you assist me? I am looking for a creature known as the Inventor."

I was frozen in place, but my heart and mind were racing. It was Thor, and he was talking to me. Me. Kamala Khan.

*I can't even.*

Tears welled in my eyes and I just started laughing and crying uncontrollably. I couldn't help it. My brain was on fire. Everything I had just been through and now this? Thor. An Avenger. Showing up here. In Jersey City! Now! Like right now! After the fight was already over!

"Miss?" he finally asked. "Are you unwell?" Hearing his voice again somehow snapped me out of my delirium. I let out a couple more laughs and wiped the tears from my eyes.

"No, Thor," I replied. "I'm just fine. But you're late."